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France

**Against the neoliberal,
authoritarian and racist
policies of this government:
take to the streets!**

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For a year now, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the bankruptcy of governments and capitalist institutions. France's President Macron is no exception. Day after day, he shows that he is incapable of handling the health crisis.

After the masks scandal and the tests scandal, there is now the vaccines scandal, and all this against the backdrop of an unprecedented social crisis for the majority of the population and incessant attacks against workers and their freedoms. It is more than ever time to build a truly unitary campaign against this government and its policies and put forward the perspective of another world without waiting for the 2022 presidential elections.

Since the onset of the health crisis, Macron has only been concerned about two things. On the one hand, the occupancy rate of intensive care beds, which has become his only gauge for taking "measures" that in no way prevent the infection of greater numbers but do prevent any social life. On the other hand, as a good "president of the ultra-rich", he is also obsessed with the profits of his friends, which must continue to grow at all costs. And on this point, we can say that Macron's policy has been effective since, according to Oxfam, despite the crisis, CAC 40 companies will have paid 37 billion in dividends to their shareholders and the accumulated assets of the 500 largest fortunes in France grew by 3% in 2020, breaking a new record.

During the entire past year this government has never implemented a health policy worthy of the name, that would reduce infections and deaths as much as possible. On the contrary, the management of the health crisis has highlighted the shortcomings of a health system destroyed by the policies implemented for decades. Even today, while the "variant" strains, in particular the British one, are becoming the majority in France, Macron has once again chosen repressive and liberticidal measures with weekend lockdown and the 6 p.m. curfew. However, the deprivation of freedoms and a life reduced to the metro-work-sleep triptych are more and more unwelcome to most. Moreover, a large part of the population has understood that the economy's wellbeing takes precedence over our health. We have all understood that this government's "stop and go" strategy does not show any prospect of an end to the pandemic. Especially when the fight against the virus only takes place during leisure hours while little is done in the workplaces where protocols cannot be implemented, public transport remains crowded and no resources are available in schools to fight against infection. However, there is an alternative to this strategy. It would consist, among other things, in giving effective priority and the corresponding resources to health and social policies making it possible to reduce the epidemic and to accelerate the acquisition of collective immunity through safe, transparent and effective vaccination.

A third social wave

The continuing health crisis is also causing an unprecedented social and economic crisis. The results for the world of work and the majority of the population are already catastrophic: according to INSEE, in 2020 there were around 700,000 job losses, in particular the most precarious jobs, temporary workers, fixed-term contracts, self-employed people, but also an increase in restructuring plans and layoffs, business closures and competitiveness plans. Not to mention the explosion of poverty which will undoubtedly be a lasting symptom of the health crisis. According to campaigning groups, the health crisis and the lockdown of March 2020 have put 1 million more people in poverty.

And in early 2021, the situation is far from improving. Keeping a large number of companies alive thanks to short time working paid for by the state, loans guaranteed by the state and the Solidarity Fund will not prevent the foreseeable bankruptcies. Short time working is already decreasing, having fallen from 8.4 million employees in April 2020 to 2.1 million in January 2021, according to the employment situation barometer of the governmental statistics and

employment agencies Dares, DGEFP, Acoess and Pôle emploi. At the same time, the number of PSE (Employment Protection Plans) and layoffs outside the PSE for economic reasons are increasing. The situation is already serious for a large number of employees and will be explosive when the partial unemployment schemes and the various forms of aid are cancelled, especially since according to the OFCE economic monitoring centre “business bankruptcies will occur during 2021 and could cause up to 200,000 job losses”.

They want to make us pay for the crisis

The Covid-19 crisis has caused a global crisis. In all countries, the economic recession and stimulus packages are causing public deficits and debts to explode. In France, in 2020, the Covid debt is estimated at almost 235 billion euros. Faced with this, in December 2020 the government set up a commission on the “future of public finances” chaired by Jean Arthuis, former finance minister under Chirac. Its mandate is to make proposals on how to repay the Covid debt, without raising taxes, through “more rigorous management of public expenditure” and “structural reforms”. The tone is therefore set, for the government, it is the workers who will pay the bill through a historic and massive drop in public spending, especially social spending. And for the past few weeks, the government has been preparing us for devastating budgetary austerity for the majority of the population. Olivier Dussopt, the deputy minister for Public Accounts, was clear in an interview in *Les Echos*, that “2021 marks the end of the ‘whatever it costs’ policy” announced in March 2020 by Macron. Not surprisingly, their plan is to reduce social benefits to a minimum, dismantle public services, make us work longer. Without even waiting for the end of the pandemic, the government has just announced, after refusing the RSA in-work benefit to 18–25-year-olds, that part of the unemployment insurance reform will come into force on 1 July 2021.

It is indeed the reduction in benefits which the government is targeting since it will be the method of calculating the daily reference salary which will be the first measure to come into force. In other words, from 1 July 2021, for some who have lost employment, their benefits could be almost halved in the worst case. But be reassured, with regard to the proposal to tax companies having “abusive” recourse to precarious contracts, its implementation would be postponed until 1 July 2022 (therefore post presidential election...)! Among its other regressive projects, the government plans to reform the priority given to the AGS, the insurance which guarantees the payment of wages in the event of default by the employer (during bankruptcy proceedings). While the payment of salaries has so far been considered as a priority over any other debt, the Ministry of Justice is considering that this priority be assigned to the remuneration of court administrators and agents rather than to the AGS and therefore to employees. The Medef employers’ federation considers this explosive and is opposed to this proposal, so perhaps the government will abandon it. These are the first concrete examples of what awaits us, if we do not stop them, in the months to come.

Despite everything, resistance

In this difficult context, mobilizations, although modest, exist in various sectors (health, energy, education, against job cuts and so on) but also more generally against the global security law, against police violence and against racism. In the end, these struggles can lead to small victories. Thus, that of the Sainte Barbe Library which made it possible after 3 months of determined strike action to obtain maintenance of wages in the event of closure, sick leave and guarantees on future contracts. These victories, even partial, are important because they demonstrate that the most precarious employee can mobilize and win; generalizing them is therefore important in this period. They remain isolated and the sluggishness of the labour movement as a whole obviously does not encourage optimism.

The fact remains that we have not managed, despite the blows and the anger expressed at the policies of this government, to mobilize massively and to bring together fightbacks and struggles even if attempts exist, as was the

case, for example, with the appeal of the CGT TUI on job cuts. [1] The main reason is obviously the health situation, the fear it entails, but also the law-and-order context: police violence, repression and freedom-killing laws which perfectly serve the interests of employers and the government.

Let's not wait for 2022

The context is also marked by the next presidential election which is fast approaching. Mistrust of the political class as a whole remains very significant and abstention is likely to be very high. This is why, 416 days before the first round, for many people on the left, right, and far right – and Macron himself – this dominates the horizon. The latter seems to be preoccupied with the sole question of how to save his candidacy. Indeed, he knows full well that, he will have difficulty in taking advantage of the political vacuum caused by the erosion of the left-right alternation as in 2017 and will not be able to play on the chords of renewal and “neither left nor right” again.

Hence for several weeks there have very discreet discussions with the parliamentary “left” and “right” but also for the last few days ministers who remind us in the media that they are “left” like Schiappa, Borne or Attal. In short, the puppets are still there. And the cherry on the cake, before all this has even started, is that we are already promised a Macron - Le Pen second round.

We reject this agenda, in which the solutions would come from the ballot box to impose an alternative and different choices. In view of the social, health and ecological emergencies, the urgent necessity is to build a unitary response to end the neoliberal, liberticidal and racist policies of this government. The priority of the workers' movement is to work to convert the anger and radicalism that have been expressed in recent years through the *Gilets Jaunes*, the pensions' movement, the struggles against racism and police violence, the struggles for the climate, feminist struggles ... into experiences of concrete solidarity and victorious struggles.

A comprehensive unitary anti-government campaign, an anti-capitalist emergency plan, now!

Faced with this government, it is imperative to build a unitary, massive, anti-government campaign. In recent months, many thematic unitary campaigns have emerged such as that against global security, against the “separatism” law, against job cuts and more recently around the call for “Patents on anti-Covid vaccines, stop. Requisition!”. These initiatives are very good news, but faced with this government, we must go further and bring together all the anger, resistance and mobilization to create a global campaign against this government around an emergency plan. It would combine different dimensions.

First, the health dimensions: for massive job creation in the health and education sector, the requisitioning of pharmaceutical companies, producers of tests, vaccines and masks, the establishment of a transparent and massive vaccination policy which puts an end to patents in the pharmaceutical industry and so on.

Second, the employment plan: for the defence of employment, it is necessary to impose a ban on layoffs and job cuts, sharing of working time without loss of salary, the creation of a million public service jobs.

Third, the economic and ecological dimensions: we must impose debt cancellation; ecological planning with the phasing out of fossil fuels, a production transition to abandon production deemed unnecessary, and an end to the

race for profits in the food industry, which facilitates the circulation of viruses.

Finally, we must respond to the emergency situation experienced by the most oppressed populations, in particular in the context of repressive responses to the health crisis, as illustrated by the catastrophic situation of young people today: with the establishment of a pre-salary for young people, a fight against all oppressions with the regularization of undocumented migrants and the opening of borders, an end to police impunity, gender equality in particular in the economic field, and the repeal of liberticidal and racist laws.

Beyond that, to respond to this unprecedented and global crisis of capitalism, there is an urgent need to build an alternative. Especially since the failures of the government are preparing a new rise of the far right which will only have to seize the legal tools put in place to amplify repression and racist and anti-social policies.

Now is the time to regroup, between all the organizations, the cross-sectoral collectives (in particular those built against the pension reform or the liberticidal laws), to discuss how to stop this crisis and unify our social camp, to rebuild a balance of power favourable to the world of work. We cannot accept the alternative Macron or Le Pen, because it will lead to more and more exploitation and oppression, in a world where the alternative “socialism or barbarism” is emerging increasingly clearly. There is no simple solution, it is not enough to proclaim that we have the best programme or that we are the best organization to open up a road for the labour movement and the social movement. What is certain is that our struggles today will have a strong impact on the context in which the presidential election will be held, on the possibility of an anti-capitalist and revolutionary alternative in the face of the global crisis of system and the growing threat of the far right and barbarism. There is, then, a genuine emergency!

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[1] The CGT union in the TUI multinational travel agency which launched a national campaign against job cuts.